The Story of the Daily Mail

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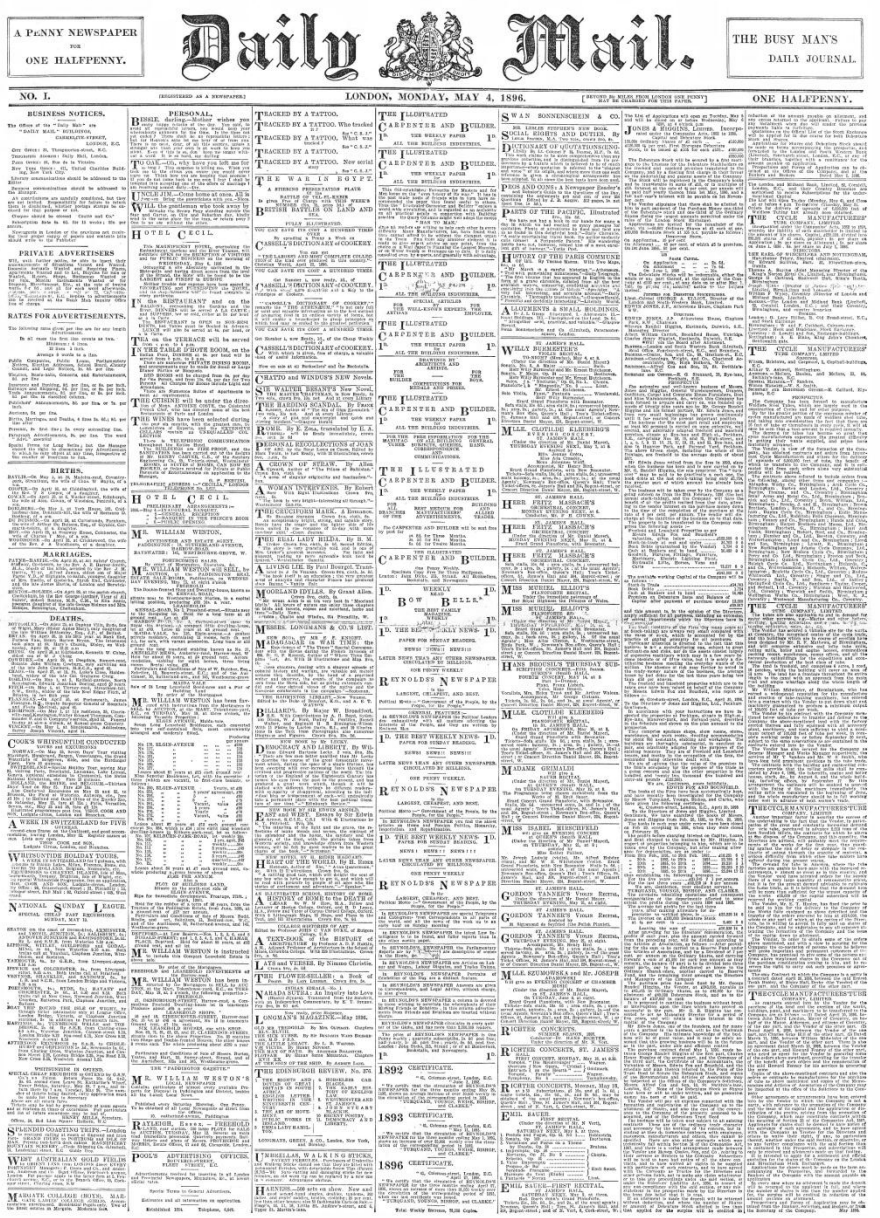
On a clear spring morning in May 1896, a young man arrived by horse-drawn carriage at Number 2, Carmelite Street, London. He hung up his coat in a modest office, then worked non-stop for two days and nights to organize a revolution that would have a profound impact on the life of Britain. Alfred Harmsworth edited, produced and oversaw the launch of a bold and radical new daily newspaper, which for the first time brought essential information into the homes of millions, in an unprecedented style and at a price they could afford. The launch of the Daily Mail more than a hundred years ago was not just the birth of a great paper – it was also the very foundation of modern journalism, and 30-year-old Alfred Harmsworth, later to become Lord Northcliffe, was the remarkable pioneer.



A PENNY NEWSPAPER FOR ONE HALFPENNY.

Daily Mail.

THE BUSY MAN'S DAILY JOURNAL.

NO. I. LONDON, MONDAY, MAY 4, 1896. ONE HALFPENNY.

First edition of the Daily Mail, 4 May, 1896

Ever since 4 May 1896, the Daily Mail has been praised and plagiarised, copied and cursed. It has been ceremoniously incinerated and ceremonially honoured – most recently as Newspaper of the Year in 2012. As

well as bringing the events of the world to millions of readers, the Daily Mail can genuinely claim to have changed the course of history.

In a century of adventure and disclosure, of courage and crusading, it has probably contributed more to progress than any other newspaper. It has campaigned on issues ranging from bread to barrage balloons, from aviation to unleaded petrol – and has constantly pushed forward the boundaries of communication. It has kept watch over politicians, influenced the minds of leaders and changed the thinking of governments.

Even the young Harmsworth, however, might never have imagined the enduring impact his 'Busy Man's Journal' (a penny newspaper for one halfpenny) would have. His interest in publishing had begun at the age of seven when he was given a printing set for his birthday, and despite his enthusiasm for sports and other pursuits, it continued with the editorship of his school magazine and later with a unique and informative weekly magazine called 'Answers to Correspondents'.

He was determined to be a newspaperman, but like no other newspaperman before him. His energy and vision were backed by an unparalleled news instinct: an ability to see the potential for news even before it broke, an ability to predict the pace of change in the world while others seemed not to notice. Harmsworth also had an intuitive gift for anticipating public opinion: he knew what they wanted even before they did. The ultimate proof was the launch of the Daily Mail to cater for an increasingly curious and literate public in an age of innovation. People were eager to read and understand the momentous events of the day. There were halfpenny papers already, but they were cheap in every sense. There were penny papers, too, but they were wordy and dull. Even the so-called great newspapers of the age lacked initiative and were remote from the people.

Harmsworth wanted his news fresh, simple and interesting. He formed a partnership with his brother, Harold, who had 'a good head for figures'. (It was a fair assessment, for later, as the first Viscount Rothermere, he would become the most powerful influence in British newspaper finance.) The initial circulation estimate was 100,000. By the time the last news-vendor had sold his final copy, the Daily Mail was a sell-out at 397,215. The public had never seen anything like it. Not least among its innovations was that it began its first issue with a woman's page, arousing derision from other journals which regarded female readers as beneath consideration.

Harold Harmsworth (1868-1940), 1st Viscount Rothermere

Over the years which followed, the Daily Mail put itself not just on the front line of every major story, but often at the forefront of pace-setting controversy. By the start of the Boer War its circulation had risen above a million, far higher than any newspaper in the world. Even in those early days 'The Chief', as Harmsworth

became known to his staff, was setting standards which are now the norm in journalism. He sent a powerful team of reporters to cover the Boer War, including Edgar Wallace and George Warrington Steevens.

With dispatches by the first woman war correspondent, Lady Sarah Wilson, the aunt of Winston Churchill, from the besieged Mafeking, he brought the public reports that vividly illustrated the courage and character of Britons with their backs against the wall. The Daily Mail was determined that it should not, in the words of The Chief, be compelled simply 'to look through the eyes of office and speak with the tongue of bureaucracy'. It decided that the truth should not be hidden from the nation just because it was unpleasant – and there was much unpleasantness. It was, therefore, the Daily Mail which won the bitterly contested right to print uncensored news from that battlefront – and the truths that had been denied by Government were eventually admitted. The next year, 1902, the Mail published the terms of the peace settlement as a world exclusive, ahead of the Government announcement. The new-born paper thus forged an immediate reputation for exclusive and reliable news, and for campaigning for the ordinary citizen.

Early campaigns included a drive to install telephones in police stations and another to equip fire brigades with modern rescue and emergency equipment. When in 1909 motor taxis were depriving London's hansom cab drivers of a living, the Mail was there to raise cash to help their families and organize instruction in motor driving for more than 500 drivers.

From the beginning, the Mail has helped to set the social and technological agenda of the nation. In the very first issue it predicted, with striking foresight, the place that the motor car – then much derided – would occupy within a few years. It seized on every advance in communication. Direct telegraphic contact was established between its London and New York offices within a year of launch. From 1905 the paper was printed in Paris. Articles were telegraphed from London and typeset in identical style, so that the Daily Mail could be on Continental breakfast tables at the same time as in Britain – ten hours earlier than all the other British papers, which had to be shipped across the Channel. Radio broadcasts of major events were organized over even greater distances and the latest equipment was installed at the Mail's offices to enable it to be first with the news and pictures. The tradition continued and in 1962 the Mail carried the first news column transmitted through the communications satellite Telstar.

In 1909, at the suggestion of Lord Rothermere, the Daily Mail undertook the most dramatic venture in the history of newspapers by establishing its own paper-making industry in Newfoundland with the purchase of 3400 square miles of land and building its own model town, Grand Falls.

Newsprint from the Daily Mail's Grand Falls paper mill in Newfoundland is carried by steam lorry along the embankment to the printing presses in Carmelite House

But it has been in times of national conflict that the paper has most visibly exercised its influence. For years before the outbreak of the First World War, Harmsworth – by then Lord Northcliffe – had been suspicious of the growing strength of Germany. The Daily Mail warned frequently that the Germans intended to start a war, and campaigned vigorously for a change in the Sea Laws, which would severely limit the power and activities of the British Navy in battle. The foreboding was dismissed as scaremongering by other newspapers. The criticism only hardened Northcliffe's resolve. When his prophecies came true in 1914, he was determined to make the Daily Mail the voice of the common soldier. While troops were being butchered in their tens of thousands, and the Secretary for War, Lord Kitchener, was appealing for more men to take their place at the front line, Northcliffe accused Kitchener of supplying them with inferior and inadequate munitions.
The 'Shell Crisis' brought screaming headlines in 1915, with warnings that delay would be paid for in men's lives, and led to an unprecedented confrontation between press and government. Northcliffe arrived at the Mail offices one day to find that copies of the paper had been burned by a jeering crowd at the Stock Exchange. The press lord had been hanged in effigy. Circulation dropped a million copies in 24 hours. Northcliffe replied, 'The other newspapers are wrong and I am right. And the day will come when you will all know I am right.'

His actions led to the fall of the Asquith Government. Lloyd George took over, re-equipped the army and under his leadership, Britain won through. The Germans acknowledged Northcliffe's part in their downfall by striking a bronze 'hate medal' of him.

A medallion produced by Germany in the First World War attacking the hated British propagandist Lord Northcliffe. One side shows Northcliffe sharpening his forked quill pen with a nearby ink pot labelled 'Propaganda ink'. The other side shows Satan feeding a blazing globe with the Times and Daily Mail, Northcliffe's press empire. By K Goetz circa 1917.

Nowhere has the Mail's influence been greater than in the history of aviation. It instantly recognized its importance even before the Wright brothers made their first successful powered flight in 1903. To encourage rapid progress, in 1910 it offered a £10,000 prize to the first person to fly from London to Manchester in a day. One rival journal ridiculed it by promising the same amount to the first person to fly to Mars and back in a week. Another offered £10 million to anyone who flew five miles from London and back – one offer is as safe as the other, it declared.

But Northcliffe's commitment to the infant technology of flight had far-reaching results, and most of the early landmarks of aviation were set up in direct response to the Mail's challenges. When Bleriot flew the channel in 1909, he did so to claim a Daily Mail prize. When Alcock and Brown crossed the Atlantic ten years later, it was to claim yet another. In 1910 the Mail sponsored the first Channel crossing by an airship and exhibited it around Britain to underline to people and Government the military threat posed by Germany. So firm was the Mail's backing for the conquest of the air that Harold, by then Viscount Rothermere, became Britain's first Secretary of State for Air during the Great War.

The Mail went on to commission 'Britain First', the prototype for the Bristol Blenheim, then the most powerful bomber in the world. It was mass produced in readiness for the war that eventually came in 1939, and played

a crucial role in the Battle of Britain. It was a Blenheim that flew the first sortie of the war and was the first plane to sink a U-boat and a Japanese submarine. At the paper's Golden Jubilee on 4 May 1946, Winston Churchill paid tribute to 'this enormous, lasting, persuasive and attractive newspaper' which was 'always true to King and country – always keeping the flag flying'. Churchill declared ‘a new chapter was opened when the Daily Mail was founded and scores of millions of people became newspapers readers who had not been attracted the older forms of journalism’.

'Britain First', built by the Bristol Aeroplane Company to the specifications of Viscount Rothermere

When Northcliffe died in 1922 the flood of tributes from around the world – from the President of the United States to the printers who composed his newspapers, and the readers who bought them – made clear his place in history. The paper was taken over by Harold, then by Harold's son and now run by the present Viscount Rothermere, great-nephew of the founder.

In the years since Northcliffe's death, the Mail has continued to uphold his standards and ideals in popular journalism. It was Vincent Mulchrone who wrote of the lying in state of Sir Winston Churchill, 'Two rivers run silently through London tonight, and one is made of people. Dark and quiet as the night-time Thames itself, it flows through Westminster Hall, eddying about the foot of the rock called Churchill.'

There have been writers and adventurers such as Noel Barber, the Mail's great foreign correspondent. His stories and anecdotes even now influence young reporters: of how he drove across the Austrian border into Hungary and back in 1956 to file the first dramatic invasion despatch about a woman facing Russian tanks at the barricades – she had died in his arms; of how he became the first Englishman to set foot on the South Pole since Scott (the Mail, incidentally, had published the first photographs of Captain Scott and his companions at the North Pole); of how his hand was outstretched to greet Edmund Hillary after the explorer's great trek; of how his most private parts were frozen to a lavatory seat en route to that world scoop (for the medically inclined, he was freed with a jug of hot water).

Noel Barber (1909–1988) at the South Pole

The Daily Mail was relaunched as a compact newspaper in 1971 under what is universally recognized in the newspaper industry as the brilliant editorship of Sir David English. Through its writers, designers and photographers, the Mail has since won more awards than any other newspaper.

The campaigns have continued. In the 1980s, the Mail set out to protect young people from the brainwashing enticements of the Moonies under the famous headline: 'The Church that Breaks Up Families'. It led to the longest libel action in British legal history. The Daily Mail won, and the Government ordered a review of the Moonies' activities, which were severely curtailed in Britain. At the 1983 British Press Awards the Daily Mail received a unique tribute and special award for its 'relentless campaign against the malignant practices of the Unification Church'. How Northcliffe would have enjoyed that.

Pyramid selling was another social evil fought by the Mail, with evidence of 26 suicides and 214 mental breakdowns among the victims of high-pressure pyramid sales companies. In 1973 pyramid selling was banned by the Government. In the environment, it was the Daily Mail which prised open the issue of lead-free petrol when the motor and oil industries had apparently left it to gather dust. The list of major campaigns is long, and still growing. Recent campaigns include the Daily Mail farm aid appeal, save rural Scotland, the Money Mail's debtbusters, Reading Clubs 2000, genetic food watch and a prostate cancer appeal.

In May 1896, Alfred Harmsworth put his coat back on after his 48-hour marathon to bring out the first Daily Mail and then he went home and slept for 24 hours. He could scarcely have dreamed that more than a hundred years later, it would be Newspaper of the Year and enter the 21st century with daily sales over two million. The present-day staff maintain the spirit and ideals of its founder – that it would inform, entertain and persuade. This is the Daily Mail of today. If Northcliffe were still alive, he would undoubtedly look forward to its tomorrow with pride and enthusiasm.